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HOMER IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

THE views I hold on this subject were briefly set forth in a letter published in the *Nation* of April 8, 1897. The arguments I considered to be good ones then, seem to me to be of equal force now ; and so I shall be pardoned if this paper is largely an expansion of what was said at that time. Nor am I alone in thinking it a very great mistake to make the sudden transfer from Xenophon to Homer. Various Greek scholars, some of them teachers in schools, and others in universities, and some of them men of the greatest authority in matters pertaining to Greek have told me that they held the same opinion as the one advocated in this paper. Teachers in schools have told me that they made Homer follow Xenophon only because the colleges required it ; although, if the truth were known, it might be found that the colleges make the requirement in order to satisfy the teachers in the schools. I had earnestly hoped that the Southern Association would cut loose from Homer, and would insist that only Attic prose should be read by boys preparing for college, on the same principle that would keep them from making Chaucer a requirement in English.

If we knew that children in France were taught the metric system in their elementary arithmetic, and were then made to study one in which the English system of weights and measures was employed, should we not call this a very unwise procedure ? But would it not be very closely analagous to the common way of making Xenophon the first author to be read by beginners in Greek, and Homer the second.

There can be no doubt that the burden of proof is on those who favor the retention of Homer. Simply state the facts, and their position *seems* to be so utterly unreasonable, and in such plain violation of the soundest educational principles, that this would surely appear to be a one-sided question. The statement of the case is this :

Here is a foreign and ancient language, acknowledged to be extremely difficult, especially in its forms and in its vocabulary. The hold on it acquired even by graduates of good colleges is so imperfect, that the opponents of the language find one of their most effective weapons of attack, by simply pointing to the meager results obtained after five or six years of earnest and faithful work on the part of teacher and pupil. Ask the graduate if he can really read Greek for the sake

of pleasure, and the question is apt to provoke a smile. Ask the professor if his A.B. graduates can do this, and the question will probably call forth a sigh. A few—a very few—select minds are able to do it; but for ninety-five out of every hundred college graduates the case is probably as has been stated.

In teaching this language the common sense of the civilized world has settled down on two things: first, Attic prose must be the basis of the teaching and constantly kept in view as the standard; and secondly, Xenophon is, on the whole, the most suitable author to begin with, and the *Anabasis* the most suitable of his works. Even this book, however, it may be remarked in passing, is too difficult for beginners, and many teachers approach it through some sort of a “gate;” and this is wise; for Xenophon wrote the *Anabasis* for Greeks and not for foreigners, and for men instead of boys.

So far, so good. In opening up this difficult subject to immature minds the teacher begins with about as simple a presentation as circumstances warrant, and leads the pupil along in steady and orderly progression, linking the things to be learned with what has been already learned; and if any human mind has discovered two better principles of teaching than these, the fact has been kept a profound secret.

What has a boy acquired in the hands of a good and capable teacher by the time he has read his four books of the *Anabasis*? He has his prose paradigms pretty well in hand—and that is more than many a college graduate can say—and has the nucleus (but nothing more) of a prose vocabulary. He begins to think he sees daylight ahead of him. He is beginning to acquire some degree of confidence in himself, and in the new powers developed in him by his training in Greek. While his pathway is still difficult, he at least feels that the ground under his feet is solid. The principles he has learned seem to be principles sure enough, and capable of constant application, barring the exceptions that help to prove the rules. In other words, he feels encouraged, as he sees that Greek can be learned, like other things. It is hard enough, even thus, and he does not want his lessons lengthened that he may see the outcome in any particular part of the narrative. Still, he is satisfied. If it hadn't been Greek, it would have been something else to worry him. And then, he knows a little about a language that comparatively few boys study, and the road begins to look smoother and not so steep.

What is the next thing that is done for him? Is he led along a gradual ascent, as would be the case if he were studying Latin or

French, or German? *No*. The most violent wrench is made that occurs anywhere in his whole school or college course. Though he is still a beginner, he is plunged into the most archaic literature the language possesses. Instead of continuing to read Greek like Xenophon's, he is reading Greek as unlike this as the literature affords. Instead of finding that he can constantly apply the principles he learned so slowly, they are so frequently violated, that exceptions now seem to be the rule. Instead of having firm ground under his feet, he has shifting sand. One of his strongest mental props is knocked from under him, for he cannot see any evidence of *law* in what he is now reading. One thing seems to do about as well as another, and he is in a strange and fluctuating dialect, with new and odd forms, new words without end, new meanings to old words, new syntax, and, of course, a new "pony" to help him make some progress and to guide his guesses.

I have tried to make this a fair picture of the way the matter stands in the case of the average boy; and if the picture represents the truth, all will agree that there must be some impelling consideration weighty enough to counterbalance the soundest principles of teaching. Is this so? Does practice rejoice against theory in this one language and in no other? The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. Can it be that spirit and life can be breathed into this so-called dead language only by such a radical departure from sound and logical method?

What reasons are assigned for this departure? Is it done so as to make sure that a boy who discontinues his Greek when he enters college shall have read *some* of Homer in the original? Hardly; because the courses, being confessedly "preparatory," are arranged for those who keep up the study of Greek, and not for those who fall by the way. It is to be presumed (though I have no statistics to prove it) that the large majority of those who complete the Greek requirements for entrance to college, continue the study for a year or two after they enter; and it is out of the question to suppose that conscientious teachers would in this manner sacrifice the many for the sake of the few. For, if the student continues his Greek in college, it is almost always the case that he has to go back to Attic prose, only to find that the foundation he had slowly and laboriously laid has become unsettled and shaky, and as far as Attic prose is concerned he is really worse off than when he took up Homer; and yet, Attic prose, bear in mind, *has* to be the standard form of the language.

Is it because of the great place Homer holds in literature, in order

that boys may early learn to feel his power and charm? If so, the end is probably defeated ninety times out of a hundred. If the pupil is faithful and industrious, the task is too laborious, progress is too slow, and what is read is too small in amount. Or if, as is very likely, he "rides a pony," he had better be referred at once to a *good* prose or poetical translation which will be worth reading in itself as English literature. I emphasize "good," because the probability is that his "handy literal translation" will vitiate his taste for good English, and will enable him to read the whole of both poems in less time than the conscientious student puts upon his two or three books. If the teacher wants a beginner to

"hear, as ocean on a western beach,
The surge and thunder of the Odyssey,"

he will not succeed by having him read this small amount. This process has been likened by Professor Gildersleeve to bringing in a bucket of salt water and pretending that by dabbling in it we are getting a sight of the ocean!

Is it for the sake of learning more Greek? I honestly believe that for every step forward in Homer, the boy slips back two or three steps in the scant knowledge of Attic, unless the teacher tries to prevent this by constantly requiring Homer to be expressed in terms of Attic, a process I suppose none will undertake to defend, either from the point of view of linguistic or literary gain, since it degrades Homer and makes of his great poems a mere *corpus vile* for the beginner to practice his crudities upon.

Shall we say that the object is not to gain an increased but a wider knowledge of Greek, by contrasting the language in its fluid and in its comparatively solidified state? How can it be other than a pedagogical blunder of the first magnitude to attempt such a wide leap with youngsters whose legs are by no means steady under them even in the plain and beaten path of the *Anabasis*? As well take a child to whom the smooth and gradual ascent of the Campanile in Venice is fatiguing, and start him up the sides of the Great Pyramid, where even a grown man has to be both pushed and pulled.

The strongest argument, however, for retaining Homer in a preparatory course seems to be the one presented by Mr. William F. Abbot, of Worcester, Mass., in a letter to the *Nation* published two weeks after my communication appeared. His argument may be summed up as follows: As a mere abstract question it does seem

absurd to read Homer in secondary schools, but the adoption of a logical course would tend still more to disgust the young American of today with Greek. On the other hand, the study of Homer arouses a genuine interest in Greek literature. In no part of the classics studied by schoolboys can so deep an interest be kindled as in Homer. The simplicity of his style and the fascination of his story are so great that it does not require much time to learn the peculiarities of the dialect well enough to read intelligently and with great enjoyment; and the boys are stimulated to know more of Homer's strange world of over twenty centuries ago. Mr. Abbot believes that the banishment of Homer from the schools would give a severe blow to the already waning study of Greek; and the difficulties, he says, vanish into thin air in the light of experience — and his experience covers more than fifteen years.

I will add to this the following testimony on the same side: Professor Seymour, of Yale, in a letter on this subject, told me that he once read at a teachers' convention a paper advising the discontinuance of Homer in the schools, and that he had never had such a hostile audience to face as he had then, for the teachers of the preparatory schools would not hear to the banishment of Homer.

Now I frankly admit that an ounce of experience and actual fact is worth a pound of mere theory, and that if we could not keep boys from being "disgusted" with Greek by following any logical method, we ought to surrender some of our logic and try to secure good results without it. But the position taken by Mr. Abbot seems to deliver us right over into the hands of the Philistines. It is enough to make Macaulay — the man whose indignation at Mitford caused him to burst forth into his famous panegyric on Athenian literature — turn in his grave, to hear that Athenian prose does not contain enough material to occupy the first three years of Greek study without disgusting the learner even more than he has already become by the use of the *Anabasis*. And this is a language frequently spoken of as "the noblest of languages," "the most perfect form of human speech." No stories can be culled from the *Cyropædeia*, no chapters from the *Memorabilia*, no scenes from the *Hellenika*, no episodes from Thucydides, no selections from the revised Attic of the sparkling Lucian, not enough from all these put together to fill up the third year of study without causing the boy to turn his back on Greek in disgust! Or, if we must go outside of Attic prose, no interesting reading book can be constructed from Herodotus, in spite of his reputation as one of the world's most charming raconteurs, and in spite of the fact that Cyrus, Cræsus,

Darius the Great, Miltiades, Xerxes, and Leonidas are some of the great figures that move across his pages. Our free-born, ingenuous, intelligent boys, the heirs of a civilization and culture saved for them by the men who fought at Marathon, Thermopylæ, Salamis, and Plataea, cannot be inspired with a keen enough interest in these great achievements to save them from an increasing disgust! I cannot think that we teachers of Greek are ready to decry our wares to this extent. I am not speaking here from the point of view of an enthusiast on the subject of Greek literature, as if it were adapted to thrill schoolboys. We all lament the fact that in Latin and Greek we have so little that is really attractive to the majority of those to whom we teach these languages, just as we often lament the fact that the choicest English literature we can give them is frequently pronounced a bore. But I do not believe Greek is waning because of the disgust with it, but because the schools now teach so many new subjects easier than Greek and more attractive to many minds, that the Greek quotient is smaller because the divisor is larger.

But ought not the boys who discontinue Greek after their three years in the school to know something about Homer? Most emphatically, *yes*. Put into their hands Dr. Church's *Story of the Iliad* and his *Story of the Odyssey*, and they will have a far better knowledge of Homer as literature than they acquire by the other process. These have been two standard books in the "English Parallel" assigned to my beginners in the days when I was teaching a preparatory course in Greek. In the college course my students are required to read the volume on Troy in the series, "Epochs of Ancient History;" and to give them some insight into the Homeric Question, they read Mr. Grote's twenty-first chapter, and in this manner I believe the students who take my A.B. course are better equipped as regards an intelligent acquaintance with Homer than they would be by working their way through two or three books of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* at school and several more in college.

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HOMER IN SCHOOLS

I WISH to say a few words as to how Homer should be taught in our schools. I believe we can all do mission work, in establishing a higher order of instruction and in arousing a keener interest in Homeric studies. I appeal to you briefly from five standpoints.

First—Literature. The teacher, if he be a true teacher, should make the pupil appreciate at the very outset the beauties before him. It is not enough that he tell him that the Iliad is an immortal poem; he must explain to him *why* it is immortal. If it has within it what will never die, it is the teacher's business to show that vital element which always appeals to man. In the very first line the work should begin. In the "Sing, O Goddess" the teacher should say, "What do we see here?" The person of the poet is behind a veil; the poet, because he is a truly great poet, steps from our view, and we hear not Homer speaking but Achilles, Agamemnon, Odysseus. He sings because there is a divine inflatus within him. In what contrast is the *Arma virumque cano* of Vergil? Here we are brought face to face, not with the heavenly muse, but with the poet of the court of Augustus. Again the teacher should point out how Homer plunges *in medias res*, the advantages gained thereby and the contrast between the life of poems which have followed this device and those which have departed from it. He should show him how the poet uses the plastic art that the situation may be unfolded gradually and not thrust obtrusively upon the reader. These are a few among a hundred things which it is not only the privilege but the duty of the teacher to emphasize immediately. It is the interest of the pupil that the instructor should strive to win and when such interest is gained there will be no fear that the study of Homer will not be a success in the preparatory school.

Second—Dialect. There is no danger that the dialect will prove too great a stumbling block. In fact even the dialect can be made interesting. What right have we to set up any longer the Attic as the standard and make the student feel that everything which differs from that is strange, exceptional, or irregular? The only real standard ought to be that great mother, the primitive Greek. It is only when we go back to her that we can realize how far the children have wandered away and how Attic after all is often her most wayward daughter. How much more it would mean to the student to tell him, for example, that *ἔσος* is a wrong transmission for *ἔσος* instead of causing him to believe that there is a mysterious lengthening of the first syllable in the Homeric form. Again it is a downright shame to tell a student that such a "contraction" as *ὀρώμενται* is "contraction by assimilation," as if there were some uncanny influence which has been exerted here. We must not teach such nonsense. The pupil is entitled to know the history of the transmission of this form and it is the teacher's business to explain it. I would not have you suppose that I advocate the teaching of comparative philology at such a stage as this. I do not, but I do recommend that the instructor give glimpses into this great field beyond the student's horizon and inspire within him the desire to find out more about it in the time to come.

Third—Archæology. Think what material the teacher has in this line to interest the student and to explain Homeric life. It is indeed unfortunate that the pupil should be so frequently deceived, that he should receive, for

example, any such misconception concerning the *θώραξ* as to suppose that its meaning in the original poem corresponds to its later meaning, that the epithet "Bronze-clad Achæans" has any reference to "dress." He should get right conceptions of such things in the preparatory school and not be required to wait till future days to be undeceived.

Fourth—Mythology. Here we come to a subject that lies very near my heart. I believe that we should teach mythology not as a collection of fables but as something real. If the divine truth is revealed universally, the question before us in teaching mythology is, "what of this revelation is the inheritance of the Greeks?" It is not enough that the pupil should read about Apollo sending a pestilence; he must learn *why* Apollo became the god of pestilence. When he sees that Hermes is the messenger of the gods, he must be taught that if Hermes be the wind god originally, such service would be his natural prerogative, for we read of Him "who maketh the winds his messengers." In this way the Greek religion can be made to mean something to the pupil.

Fifth—The Homeric spirit. Last but not least, for it is the most important of all, the student must catch the spirit of the poem. Unless he does, he does not read Homer. It is a sin for him to be taught, for example, that *φίλος* is the equivalent of a possessive adjective pronoun. The teacher who so instructs the pupil does not himself appreciate the spirit of Homer. I am reminded of an American who had learned most of his German from grammar and dictionary. In asking for his bill at the hotel, he placed his finger on his nose, which was unusually prominent, and inquired of the clerk, "Wie gross ist mein Schnabel?" He had missed, you see, the spirit of the language, as he found out afterwards.

In closing these brief remarks, let me express my firm belief that if we interest a student in Homer, we interest him in Greek forever.

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